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ABSTRACT

This newsletter describes the features and cites potential obstacles to implementation of high school student community volunteer services for credit programs. Specifically, it documents the genesis of the Students Offering Service (SOS) in the Pasadena (California) Unified School District for the purpose of demonstrating the importance of such programs. Students enroll for credit, attend two hours of class time per week with a curriculum designed to enhance what they learn from their volunteer experience, and contribute their special talents to some avenue of community service. Input to the curriculum comes from many of the district's publics. A grocery store underwrites the costs of the pilot program; the Junior League of Pasadena funds a trainer; Pasadena civic and business groups develop a resource book listing service opportunities for students; the Pasadena Board of Education contributes administrative supervision, office space and materials, and clerical support services; and a community leader volunteers to direct the program. Moreover, supervising teachers in the schools direct classroom instruction, present the curriculum, counsel students, maintain records, evaluate student progress, and foster good public relations with the district's varied constituencies. Similar programs exist in Atlanta (Georgia), Pittsburg (Pennsylvania), Washington (District of Columbia), Charlotte (North Carolina), and Salt Lake City (Utah). Isolated schools distant from businesses, housing projects, parks, and hospitals and administrative opposition to the nontraditional nature of such credit programs impede the implementation of SOS type programs. In conclusion, SOS encourages students to respect themselves as important, contributing, and caring members of the community. (JAM)

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**Updating** SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

Volume 20/Number 2/February 1989

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by Sharon Thralls

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# S.O.S.—Students Offering Service

*by Sharon Thralls*

High school students attending the Pasadena Unified School District, their backs emblazoned with S.O.S. T-shirts, are enrolling in elective community service classes and offering their enthusiasm and talent to local nonprofit agencies, churches, schools, and governmental agencies. The school system is riding the crest of a wave of change that could make the ideas of social need and community service a reality in the lives of more of today's teenagers.

A team of students representing every high school in the district selected the name "Students Offering Service" (S.O.S.) and asked fellow students on their respective campuses to attend a recruitment event to learn about voluntarism and community service. The goal of Pasadena's elective program of service and learning is to encourage students to respect themselves as important and caring helpers in their community. The course, offering five units of elective community service credit, is designed to accommodate the individual areas of student interest.

In addition to completing the required 40 hours of documented community service during the semester course, Students Offering Service allots two hours of class time per week to a curriculum intended to enhance what students learn from their volunteer experience. The curriculum focuses on:

- the history of voluntarism;
- the importance of voluntarism in the country;
- the socio-economic interdependence of society; and
- the need for volunteers in the Pasadena community.

Writes Betty Valerio, past-president of the Pennsylvania School Boards Association, "The challenges facing our society and public education are immense. And local boards and educators are being called upon to do more with less. But I would encourage local boards to continue to examine ways to connect our young people with our communities, schools, and a value system based on our common good."

The concept of school service programs has gained in popularity since the 1983 publication of the Carnegie Foundation's report on *Student Service, The New Carnegie Unit*. In the preface of the report, Ernest L. Boyer writes, "We believe such a service program would tap an enormous wealth of talent, let young people know they are needed, and help students see a connection between what they learn and how they live."

Boyer made several recommendations on the development of school service programs:

- **Specify clearly stated educational objectives.**
- **Carefully introduce and creatively promote the effort.**
- **Encourage students to serve the schools as well as the community.**
- **Develop goals that extend beyond career preparation.**
- **Encourage students to write about their service to the community.**
- **Set aside time for students to discuss their experiences and the value of their service.**

## From idea to reality

Now in operation at every high school in the district, the S.O.S. program embraces teacher and student training, formal recruitment events scheduled during the school day to introduce students to the concept of voluntarism and to publicize the available service opportunities, classroom time devoted to student experience-sharing and reflection, the use of adult community volunteers as classroom mentors and volunteer trainers, and student retreats to encourage students to develop their own volunteer team projects.

Pasadena pupils now have the chance to volunteer because a diverse group of supporters contributed the necessary resources.

- **Jurgensen's Grocery, a local business, underwrote $35,000 for two years to pilot the program, including funds for instructional materials, curriculum development, pay differentials for supervising teachers at each high school, student planning retreats, teacher planning conferences, professional trainers for recruiting students, teacher and student retreats and conferences, and student recognition awards and T-shirts.**
- The Junior League of Pasadena funded the services of a trainer for the initial recruitment event at each high school and funded a public and private school teacher in-service training to encourage coordination and development of student team volunteer projects among public and private school students.
- **A community coalition comprised of the local Volunteer Center, Chamber of Commerce, Partners in Education, and the city and school district volunteer coordinators developed a resource book of service opportunities for students. This resource of job descriptions has been given to every public and private high school in the City of Pasadena.**
- The Pasadena Board of Education committed administrative supervision, office space and materials, and support services.

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*Sharon Thralls, volunteer community service director of the Pasadena Unified School District, has served as president of the Junior League of Pasadena, trustee of the Pasadena Educational Foundation, co-chairman of the district Tutoring and Homework Assistance Network, and member of the district Adopt-A-School Planning Committee.*

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- **A community leader volunteered to direct the program for two years at the district level. This action was considered crucial in several respects:**

  1. The two-year program budget was funded at $40,500.

  2. At the end of two-year private funding period, the program can continue as a part of the regular high school offerings with a minimal amount of district staff coordination.

## Teacher involvement

Although program implementation relies on the support of district administrators and high school principals, the energy source is the teachers and students. Supervising teachers at each high school provide student support, problem-solving assistance, and visits to the community sites of the volunteer activities. The supervising teacher at each high school, selected by the principal, is responsible for:

- classroom instruction and activities,
- presentation of curriculum,
- counseling of students,
- maintenance of service and credit records,
- program public relations among faculty and parents, and
- evaluation of pupil progress and program structure.

Also, the supervisory teacher visits community agencies for student observation and, if necessary, problem-solving. A pay differential during the initial two-year development period is available to compensate supervisory teachers for their added responsibilities in program development.

## School-based development

The S.O.S. program will follow a distinctive policy development path. Instead of the traditional approach where the school board and administration develop uniform policy and regulations for district schools, each high school is responsible for building a community service program tailored to fit local needs. After two years, school and district staff will evaluate the efforts and recommend a long-term policy approach.

## Breaking new ground

Nationally, a number of public school districts and private schools include community service in their graduation requirements. Some schools offer minimal academic enrichment and may place little emphasis on student experience-sharing and reflection. According to the Most Reverend Joseph M. Sullivan, chairman of the board of directors, City Volunteer Corporations (NY), "Early in life we need to learn that volunteering is crucial in a democracy. The challenge is to balance one's own needs with a genuine responsiveness to others."

In some districts, individual schools sponsor community service programs without districtwide coordination and support. Others make after-school voluntarism available through service clubs and activities. As educators struggle to discover the best ways to instill a commitment to the community while raising students' self-esteem, a palette of public school service programs reveals a spectrum of approaches:

- **Atlanta (GA) schools** require 75 hours of community service as part of their diploma requirements.
- **Some Pennsylvania schools** (e.g., Philadelphia) have tied volunteer service to the curriculum or to a community business partnership. For example, the Chestnut Ridge High School Honor Society, funded with a $40,000 state grant, operates the local literacy program. Pittsburg schools have found that the academic performance of at-risk seventh graders improves significantly when they are involved in community service.
- Pupils at **Banneker High, a Washington, D.C. magnet school,** must complete 270 hours of community service during their four years of schooling.
- **Maryland high schools** are required to offer a community service elective.
- Students at **Highland High (Salt Lake City, UT)** participate in experience-based career education. Formal agreements between students and community agencies detail the service to be provided as well as the learning objectives. The schools provide discussion forums and specialized curricula.
- **The Academic Internship Program in Charlotte (NC),** using an afterschool format, actively involves school staff in the supervision of the service projects and the achievement of the learning goals.

## Potential obstacles

Currently about 20 percent of U.S. high schools require pupil participation in community service programs. School leaders cite concerns about supervision, transportation, liability, classroom "pull-outs," and resistant administrators.

Robert Shumer, in the March 1988 issue of *The Education Digest*, cites three main factors inhibiting the growth of school-based volunteer work:

- **Traditionally, education has been a passive activity. School programs depend on curricular content rather than on learning activities.**
- **Often schools are isolated from their communities, a world apart from area businesses, housing projects, parks, and hospitals.**
- **Many school leaders perceive education acquired through experience as less rigorous than knowledge gained through classroom instruction and texts. This attitude is a legacy from the 1960s when unstructured, "life-adjustment" experiences replaced traditional academic content.**

These obstacles, argues Shumer, should not stand in the way of implementing school programs. However, other barriers are real and must be addressed head-on, he adds. Successful efforts require time, resources, decisions about control and responsibility, teacher support and training, parent backing, and cooperation among public, community, and school leaders.

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Overcoming the obstacles is worth the effort, said David Hornbeck, former Maryland state school superintendent last spring when he accepted a $100,000 grant to promote student participation in community service.

> The United States is a nation at risk and the causes of our problems are not just matters of academic or economic performance, as serious as those problems are. We are also at risk from caring too little about one another and too much about ourselves.

## Free choice

S.O.S. is designed to encourage voluntarism—not require it. The Board took this initial stance based on the consensus view that long-term commitment to service stems from action taken of a person's free will. Elective community service courses are available on a credit no credit basis in pursuit of this goal.

Often urban school districts, such as Pasadena's, find it difficult to recruit a diverse group of students for volunteer work. Perhaps this accounts for the number of schools that have chosen instead to include community service as a graduation requirement. While many minority students in Pasadena initially indicated that neither they nor their parents had volunteered or given community service, most acknowledged they had helped in their neighborhoods and in their churches, not realizing they were "volunteering." Some students said their parents may not understand why the teens chose to volunteer service instead of helping at home or seeking a part-time job. Pasadena has addressed this issue by developing English and Spanish parent information sheets and conducting parent orientation sessions in collaboration with each school's P.T.A.

Following the Carnegie Report recommendations, parents are urged to support their children's service activities. Supervisory teachers, working with the school principal and P.T.A. officers, develop and implement parent information programs that emphasize the value of community service. Parents are informed of the practical advantages of volunteer work (e.g., the importance of community service experiences on college applications, exposure to career opportunities, learning vocational skills, raising student self-esteem, and the fact that high school grades frequently improve when students realize they are valuable and contributing members of their community).

## Program growth

During the next two years, students, teachers, and administrators will evaluate the program's educational quality and impact on pupil success to determine the best way to offer community service to the district's high school students. Issues under review include:

- **Should community service be a graduation requirement?**
- Should community service be open to all high school students or should the activity be restricted to certain grade levels?
- **What are the best ways to offer community service units?**
- Should students have the opportunity to develop their own service projects or should they be limited to ones identified by community agencies, churches, schools, and governmental agencies?

## A better tomorrow?

The Pasadena Unified School District is training its young people to be the volunteers of the future. In the meantime, stronger links are being forged between the Pasadena community and its teenagers. Young people are learning about community needs and civic responsibility as they bring their enthusiasm, skills, and talents to the community. The schools, too, are benefiting by promoting a spirit of ownership and responsibility among its most important residents—the students.

Ervin Staub, University of Massachusetts professor, offers a compelling reason why schools should involve students in the experience of giving and caring:

> We fundamentally have the potential to develop into caring, altruistic people or into violent, aggressive people. No one will be altruistic if their experiences teach them to be concerned only about themselves. But human connection is intrinsically satisfying if we allow it to be.

S.O.S provides a chance to form those connections between young persons and the community. With the support of the Board of Education, teachers, administrators, principals, students, and the community, the educational experience will be just that: students will master knowledge and skills and then put them to work for others. ■

## A Sampling of S.O.S. Programs

By offering four course options, the community service elective is available to every high school student in the Pasadena Unified School District. Every student electing community service has time to experience, share and reflect on their value as a volunteer.

- **Elective Community Service Courses (five credit units) during the regular school day.** Students attend two hours of class a week and complete a minimum of 40 hours of community service (which must be documented) during the semester. Students keep an ongoing journal and submit a written final report.
- **A Community Service Unit as part of a required senior government course. (five units of community service credit and five units of government credit).** Students attend four hours of class a week. A two-week academic community service training session is conducted at the beginning of the semester and time is reserved throughout the semester for students to share their experiences and reflect on the value of community service. Students must log a minimum 40 hours of service during the semester, keep an ongoing journal, and write a final report on the value of being a volunteer—in addition to completing the requirements of the government course. (To make this an *elective* opportunity for students, only two of the six government classes offer a community service option.)
- **Community Service as an additional elective class scheduled before or after school (five credit units).** Students attend two hours of class a week, perform a minimum of 40 hours of community service, keep an ongoing journal, and submit a written final report.
- **Community Service as Independent Study (five credit units).** This alternative accommodates students whose schedules do not have room for a community service elective. In addition to the other requirements (40 hours of volunteer service, an ongoing journal, and a written final report), students must contact the supervisory teacher weekly and interview five adult volunteers in order to prepare written reports on their reasons for volunteering and the importance of service to the volunteer and to the community.